

Health Care, Financial Reform and Democratic Momentum

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With the midterm elections now less than seven months away, things look very different than they did in January when Republican Scott Brown was elected to fill Ted Kennedy's Senate seat in Massachusetts. During those heady days for the Republican Party, conservatives believed that the Obama administration was in freefall due to the failure of the health care bill, the inability to do anything about jobs and the economy and a resurgent GOP that had struck a rich vein of voter discontent. Republican strategists had visions of 1994 and another takeover of both houses of Congress.

A lot has happened since then. Today, while the Republicans are still hoping for big gains in November, the momentum has decidedly shifted. The election of Scott Brown has turned out not to be the knockout punch for the Obama administration which many conservatives had thought, or at least hoped, it would be. However, the election of Scott Brown was a defining moment for the Obama administration and the party of which he is the leader because it forced the president and his party to choose between backing away and conceding that their agenda for change, as modest as it actually is, was too much for the American people, or redoubling their efforts and commitment to change. Obama's decision to choose the latter option may have surprised many, and flown in the face of some of the advice he received, but it was the right decision.

This decision immediately became relevant on the issue of health care as the administration, with encouragement from leadership in Congress, decided to try to pass the bill in spite of no longer controlling, even nominally, 60 Senate seats. While the bill itself should not be described as a great piece of legislation, the fight was an important one; and Obama's victory transformed his presidency. It showed America that the president was willing to fight for something and that in addition to being a brilliant man and great speaker, he could play political hardball when necessary. Thus, while the passage of the health care bill has not transformed the Obama administration into the truly progressive presidency for which many had hoped, it has breathed some life back into his presidency and party.

Equally significantly Obama has tripped up the Republican Party. Had the health care bill failed, the Tea Partiers and other right wing activists could have had a substantial victory to their credit. This would have strengthened the narrative, and perhaps even the reality, that the Tea Party movement was something genuinely new with the potential to have a transformative effect on the Republican Party and American politics more generally. The failure of the Tea Party movement to stop the Obama health care reform has put an end to much of this conversation. Instead, the Tea Party movement is beginning to be understood as just another radical partisan movement with little transformative power other than of being an albatross around the neck of the Republican Party.

The debate around the financial reform bill has also demonstrated that the Republican Party has been caught a little off guard by renewed Democratic vigor and that Republicans may become

captives of their own irrational rhetoric. Republicans initially responded to the proposed bill by calling it another bailout. Given the nature of the bill, this rhetoric got little traction so the Republicans quickly abandoned it. The Republican Party, of course, cannot support a bill that goes so clearly against their principle of making rich people richer, but realize that taking a strong position against it will not play in the post health care political reality, so they face a real quandary.

In the likely event that this bill passes, President Obama will be able to point to another major piece of domestic legislation almost immediately following the health care bill. The charges of socialism against Obama will not die down after this bill is passed; they may in fact get stronger. These cries, however, will become increasingly irrelevant. Some significant minority of the American people will continue to call Obama socialist almost no matter what, but this is beginning to look less like a problem for Obama and more like one for the Republican's, as they find themselves controlled by a radical and angry, right wing base.

The Democratic Party's fortunes have taken a turn for the better in the last few months because, for what seems like the first time since Obama took office, the party has been aggressive, refused to back down in the face of Republican attacks and abandoned efforts to pass legislation with bipartisan support. However, the Republicans can regain the momentum back from the Democrats if the Obama administration is not vigilant about setting the agenda, pushing hard for more legislation and not being intimidated by the Republicans.